The Light Fighter's Load

Let's Reconsider It—Again

CAPTAIN DALE E. WILSON

Recent interest in low intensity conflict has fired the imagination of the Infantry community and returned the light infantryman to the limelight—a position he was forced out of by the community's focus on mechanized warfare in the wake of the Vietnam War.

I'm concerned, however, by some of the trends I've noticed in articles in INFANTRY and other service publications. The ongoing debate over the combat load for light infantrymen and some of the proposed solutions, for instance, have led me to wonder whether any light fighters with combat experience were consulted or otherwise involved in the decision-making process that led to those proposals.

While I applaud any effort to reduce the light infantryman's load, I question the decision to cut the basic load of ammunition to the levels I have seen discussed. For example, Captain Derek Soriano in his article "Ammunition: Dummy, Inert, and Simulated" (INFANTRY, November-December 1987, pages 11-13) writes that the basic load of M16 ammunition for Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC) students is seven magazines. In addition, each man carries two grenades, and the squads are allocated 1,100 rounds of M60 machinegun ammunition, 44 rounds of 40mm ammunition, four LAWs, and four claymores.

Those of us who served in light infantry units in Vietnam can readily attest that these figures are ridiculously low. This should also be readily apparent to the light infantrymen undergoing training at the new Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, if their combat loads are similar to those employed in IOBC.

Ammunition expenditure rates in combat are distressingly high. Aimed fire is difficult at best because the targets are so fleeting. This point is dramatically made by Captain Max Oliver in his article "Infantryman's Combat Weapon" (INFANTRY, November-December 1987, pages 9-11), which appropriately precedes Captain Soriano's in that issue. There is a marked tendency for riflemen to employ their weapons on full automatic, and the expenditure of ammunition for area-fire weapons such as the M60 and the M203 is correspondingly high.

IN VIETNAM

Because of this tendency, and because of the difficulty in obtaining responsive ammunition resupply, units in Vietnam established much higher levels for their basic loads of ammunition. In my unit (Company C, 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry, 11th Light Infantry Brigade), we carried (to the best of my recollection) the following:

Riflemen: Seven magazines plus two bandoliers of 5.56mm, four grenades, two smoke grenades, and one claymore.

Machinegunners: Eight hundred (800) rounds of 7.62mm, four grenades, and a claymore.

Assistant machinegunners: Same as the riflemen, plus 400 rounds of 7.62mm.

Grenadiers: One hundred ten (110) rounds of 40mm, four grenades, two smoke grenades, and a claymore.

Automatic riflemen: Seven magazines plus four bandoliers of 5.56mm, four grenades, two smoke grenades, and a claymore.

In addition to these amounts, the men who were stronger often carried extra ammunition. As a grenadier armed with an M79 grenade launcher, I usually packed an extra two bandoliers of 5.56mm and 200 rounds of 7.62mm, which were redistributed to other members of my platoon as needed. In addition, on operations in which the commander anticipated unusually high expenditures of 81mm mortar ammunition, each man in the company was required to carry an 81mm high-explosive round strapped to the bottom of his rucksack. Selected personnel were also designated to carry the detonator cord and one-and-a-half-volt batteries needed to set up a daisy chain of three to five claymores for a platoon "mechanical ambush." (Only the VC and NVA employed "boobytraps.")

Grenadiers used the 24-round vests when they were available. They carried additional rounds in claymore bags (which held about 18 rounds each)

slung at the left side (for right-handed shooters) and strapped to each hip. The remaining rounds went in their rucksacks.

While these figures may sound high, experience showed us that the amount of ammunition we carried was usually just enough to get us through a heavy fire-fight and leave a reserve to tide us over until the next resupply mission.

Given the intensity of combat that our light fighters can anticipate in any future conflict, it stands to reason that similar loads will be needed to sustain them. Resupply will also be as difficult for them is it was for us, if not moreso, considering the proliferation of light air defense weapons and the limited aviation assets that will be available.

Naturally, some trade-offs will have to be made. For example, if the anticipated enemy has an armor capability, an adjustment will have to be made to incorporate Dragons and LAWs into the loads. But I'm convinced that the ammunition load schemes I've seen discussed up to this point can only lead to disaster in combat. It's time for light fighters with combat experience to sound off and for the Infantry community to rethink the infantryman's basic load--again.

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The Bayonet

Simple But Dependable

ROBERT J. BERENS

Last year the United States Army began issuing a new version of the bayonet, the M9, to its infantrymen. In an era of complex, expensive, and exotic weapons, a new bayonet may seem anachronistic, if not downright unnecessary. Surely combat techniques have progressed beyond the need for so simple a weapon, even for use by infantrymen.

Furthermore, studies conducted since the end of World War II consistently reveal among soldiers a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the bayonet. Only a small percentage of officers and enlisted men in recent times have actually used a bayonet to kill or maim an enemy. And even some of these experienced soldiers question the bayonet's use as either a weapon, a psychological ploy, or a "combat motivator"--the reasons usually given for having a bayonet. Some believe that bayonet training is also a physical conditioner, but they concede that other activities are as good or better. Likewise, some say that time spent on bayonet training as a combat skill would be better used for rifle marksmanship training.

In spite of such lukewarm support, however, the bayonet is not fading away--not just yet anyway. The truth is that the bayonet's roots go back a long, long way, and in its lifetime the weapon has proved to be amazingly resilient and useful.

The bayonet as we know it was invented in the 1640s by the French at Bayonne. The need at the time was for a back-up weapon that would enable a soldier to protect himself while he reloaded his cumbersome single-shot musket. It seems only natural that affixing a knife-like instrument to the end of the musket would come to mind, since knives, swords, and spears were among the first weapons fabricated by primitive man, and they had been around ever since.

Curiously, even with the advent of the rifle--which had a longer range, was more accurate, and could be reloaded faster than the musket—the bayonet continued to have a place in the infantryman's arsenal of weapons. Although it may have been kept around partly out of nostalgia, changing tactics played a larger part in the bayonet's new lease on life.

One such change occurred in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. During this war, the night attack was perfected as a new wrinkle, one that would take advantage of surprise and shock action. Night attacks, using stealth and concealment, enabled the combatants once again to close to a "kill-or-get-killed distance." In the hands of well trained troops, the bayonet was silent and dependable.

Once it was recognized that bayonet attacks gave armies an added dimension, the weapon itself drew closer attention from both inside and outside